

PBS - THE WEST - A Grand Anvil Chorus

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A Grand Anvil Chorus

Railroads had already transformed life in the East, but at the end of the Civil War they still stopped at the Missouri River. For a quarter of a century, men had dreamed of building a line from coast to coast. Now they would attempt it -- one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five miles of track from Omaha to Sacramento.



THE WEST
Episode Five (1868 - 1874)

THE GRANDEST ENTERPRISE UNDER GOD

In Nebraska, some 10,000 men were at work on the Union Pacific -- heading west. Most were immigrants from Ireland. But there were also Mexicans and Germans, Englishmen, ex-soldiers and former slaves -- an army of workmen moving across the plains with military precision.

There was no time for rest. A twenty-car work-train housed and fed the men, who rose at dawn. A supply train carried everything needed that day -- rails, ties, spikes, rods -- all of which had to be loaded onto flatcars and run up to the railhead where the "iron men" were already waiting.



Each rail weighed 700 pounds. It took five men to lift it into place. Two or three miles a day. Every day. Six days a week. Week in and week out.

As the Union Pacific crews worked their way westward across the prairie, hundreds of prostitutes, pimps, gamblers, saloon-keepers, gunmen followed right behind -- "a carnivorous horde," one man recalled, "hungrier than the native grasshoppers," and eager to devour the men's weekly pay.

Julesburg, August 23rd, 1867

Gambling was carried on extensively, and the saloons were full... mostly every one seemed bent on debauchery and dissipation... There appears to be plenty of money here, and plenty of fools to squander it... I verily believe that there are men here who would murder a fellow-creature for five dollars...

Henry Morton Stanley

The succession of base camps the Union Pacific built roughly seventy miles apart all had different names - - Elk Horn, Fremont, Oglalla, Laramie, Green River, and Cheyenne.

"Say you're in Wyoming, say you're at Citadel Rock on the Green River in Wyoming, and you're looking into the distance and there's nothing -- and behind you there is track going all the way to Omaha. The donkey engines coming in and getting out, hauling in materials, the clatter and the bustle and the work around you at all times, the clanging, the clanging of the sledgehammers on the rails echoing in the wilderness that had never known anything like this, ever. The sounds of the locomotives belching smoke into a previously pristine sky. There had never been a sound like this ever before.



T. H. Watkins